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ELEMENTARY EDUCATION IN SOCIETIES UNDERGOING RAPID SOCIAL CHANGES

Most societies around the world are undergoing rapid social changes. My words are directed primarily to those many countries, representing the majority of the world's peoples, where technology is only beginning its relentless impact upon long-standing ways of human life. These tend to be the countries, too, where the humanistic drive for nation-wide education of the young is only beginning to swell. But some of what I have to say, especially those portions having to do with the content and function of education, is pertinent to those highly industrialized societies where at least the concept of universal elementary and secondary education is rather well established.

I address myself to limited aspects of only three problems of elementary education in societies undergoing rapid social changes:

1. The problem of getting the child population into schools and keeping it there long enough to justify the human and material investment.
2. The problem of organizing the school for maximum productivity.
3. The issue of elementary school function.

Intelligent exploration of these problems and issues must take account of the realities of our time. Three mighty twentieth-century explosions are rocking the globe, re-charging themselves and shaking and awakening the peoples scattered over its surface:

1. an explosion in knowledge;
2. an explosion in technology;
3. an explosion in human aspirations.

Each of these explosions has profound implications for educating the young, the specific implications varying with the character of the culture examined.

The Explosion in Knowledge

Much of what is worth knowing today is not yet in any textbook. Only about five per cent of the scientists ever born have passed away. The remaining 95 per cent are very much with us, busily uncovering still more scientific knowledge. And the knowledge already accumulated in all fields—half of it a product of the twentieth century—is being recast into new theoretical constructs to explain man and the universe.

The problem of selecting and ordering from all of this a little knowledge of most worth is futile. The tasks involved defy human powers of discrimination and selectivity. An elementary education made up of a few sacred fragments of knowledge, properly sanctified and passed along to a few by the few who already have mastered it, is an anachronism.

A significant fact for all mankind is that the few cannot for much longer prescribe and protect from the many a narrow educational course leading to privileged position. Throughout all history, education has in some place been used as an instrument of power by persons in control who chose to grant or withhold access to it. The unfairness of such a practice has been vigorously attacked by liberal reformers. But the will to change rested in the

minds and hearts of those who stood to benefit most from maintaining the *status quo*. Now, however, there are new educational abodes offering promise of the good life. By contrast, some of the time-sanctified houses of intellect appear shabby and derelict. Those who dwell within yesterday's educational mansions will need little vigilance in seeking to bar doors few wish to enter.

The "sacred cow curriculum" resulting from this narrow concept of elementary education is not yet dead. It just isn't gaining many new converts. This explosion in knowledge may threaten teachers but it promises also to invigorate them and to rejuvenate the curriculum.

The Explosion in Technology

No one among us is wise enough to know what education should and can do to guide fast-changing societies caught up in the technological explosion. In the past, education has been an instrument for inducting the young into the patterns thought necessary for the preservation of society or parts of it. But today, it is difficult to know if there are any "universals" essential to the preservation and evolution of this or that society.

In the United States, widespread application of technological advances has eliminated the farmer as today's adults knew him in their childhood. In India, westernization threatens values that have stood firm for longer than man can remember. In Brazil, changes in the economy have come so quickly that the nature of the culture as a whole and "universals" within it simply is not known. Specializations brought about by technology offer choices unknown to the parents and teachers of those now faced with the alternatives.

Under these circumstances, how does education take the lead? How are curricula to reflect social conditions and human patterns that are not yet described and classified? Basic sociological and anthropological research has not yet produced the data so essential to the wise formulation of educational goals. But education cannot wait until this works is accomplished.

The Explosion in Human Aspirations

Subjugated, impoverished, illiterate and formerly isolated peoples around the world are awakening to a realization that something better than they have known is available. Furthermore, this "something better" is not in a mystical hereafter or a genealogical future. It is "of the present", to be realized in a single lifetime or in the lifetime of a child already born.

The source of these stirrings is not clear. Nor is the course and manner of communication visible. Nonetheless, a great human chain reaction spreads around the world, detonating new blasts, all part of the twentieth-century explosion in human aspirations. This human seeking is, in part, for education. Illiterate adults desire that their children learn to read and to write. As a result, today's estimates of world illiteracy have little meaning unless the statistics are broken down by age groups.

Educations can transform the character of a culture within a single generation. But to those within, the process appears interminably slow. The danger to us all is that the new seekers of a place under the sun will become impatient, will despair of the educational process, and will fail to see that the only ultimate guarantee of a place for all under the sun is the *education* of all under the sun.

Tho their seeking, each of the fast-changing societies brings something unique—customs, views of man's destiny, human aspirations—which must not be lost and which offers potential enrichment to other societies. The joining of what one country has found to be of value to what others cherish may well produce a new culture, richer than that which any single society has known or could evolve. The swallowing of one culture by another is an evil thing to be avoided like the plague because, in the swallowing, the swallower learns not from the swallowed and what the swallowed was is no more.

Educational Opportunity For The World's Children.

Only slightly more than half (approximately 300 of 550 million) of the world's boys and girls between the ages of 5 and

14 are in any school, public or private. Obviously, then, the top priority educational problem of world-wide scope is that of providing schools for the remaining 45 per cent and getting these children into them. But this is only the beginning. The second most important problem is that of keeping them there.

It is estimated that four years, at least, of schooling are required for functional literacy. But this means four consecutive, sequential years, building one upon the other. It does not mean one year of primary education followed by three repetitions of that year [1].

Nonetheless, in every section of the world, large numbers of children are experiencing dull, stultifying repetition and the demoralizing effects of grade failure. In Brazil, for example, surveys completed in 1954 and 1955 revealed that 68 per cent of first-grade pupils, 56 per cent of second-grade pupils, and 42 per cent of third-grade pupils repeated their respective grades [2]. Because of this high non-promotion rate, first-grade enrollment embraced children or from seven to twelve years of age.

A concentration of enrollment in the first grade or two, made up of those who remain no longer and of those who fail to meet requirements for promotion, is characteristic of underdeveloped school systems. But even in some sections of Western Europe, 40 per cent of the pupils repeat a grade or more before completing the elementary unit. And I have uncovered first-grade classes in the United States in which up to 50 per cent of the children were retained. Large numbers of children remaining in school for only a year or two or completing only a grade or two in four or five years of schooling represent a shocking waste of teaching and material resources in countries often desperately short of both.

Nonpromotion of children results from faulty conceptions of the educative process, deficient selection and placement of learning tasks, and inadequate insight into the consequences of grade failure. Approximately 25 per cent of our children receive 75 to 80 per cent of the failure through little or no fault of their own. Three out of every five grade failures are boys, not because boys are less bright than girls but because the bases of promotion are inherently prejudicial to boys. Nonprometed slow-learners do not

achieve at higher levels than do their promoted slow-learning counterparts. In fact, nonpromoted children tend to do worse on achievement tests a year after their retention than they did at the time of nompromotion. Nonpromoted children, compared with promoted children, get along less well with classmates, value themselves less highly, and want to quit school as soon as possible [3]. Clearly, nonpromotion has not proven its worth as a general policy for improving the quality of education.

But to reject nonpromotion is not to endorse so-called social promotion. Neither promotion nor nonpromotion adequately facilitates school programs that differentiate rates of progress for children of differing abilities. Rapidly changing societies have the opportunity to examine new patterns of school organization so badly needed today.

Providing schools and teachers and getting the world's children into these schools are staggering economic and engineering problems. But assuring maximum pupil benefit from the investment is a problem of pedagogical enlightment.

Organizing for Instruction

The present ordering of learning tasks in most of the world's elementary schools is a product of haphazard guesswork, personal bias and trial-and-error. Certain items get into the curriculum and stay there, whether or not children experience repeated failure in seeking to deal with them. How we arrange these items in the curriculum bears little relationship to what we know about young learners.

An erroneous concept of individual differences led to an erroneous grading of subject-matter. A once popular view of individuality is that humans vary primarily in overt, observable traits. Some apply themselves better, are more cooperative, have greater powers of perseverence and are less lazy. Such a view leads to techniques of external motivation, involving reward or punishment, for changing these traits. The child who is praised or punished presumably works harder and higher achievement is expected to result. In fact, however, whether or not a child is promoted from grade to grade, for example, has more to do with

teacher whim and fancy than with the effort put forth by that child.

The more tenable view of individual differences it that human beings differ from one another biochemically, biologically and in a variety of ways intimately affecting their readiness to learn what schools set before them. Data reveal that the overall range in achievement in a heterogeneous elementary school class is about the same as the grade level: four years in the fourth grade, five years in the fifth, six years in the sixth, and so on. Furthermore, there are some children in each class who range from subject to subject by as much as four grades in their fourth year at school, five grades in their fifth, six grades in their sixth. In fact, less than 15 per cent of the children in a fourth-grade class normally are at grade level by the middle of the year. The others range upward and downward by as much as several grades.

To attempt to squeeze these wide ranges of readiness to learn and of accomplishment into the restrictions and prescriptions of a grade level is to construct a Procrustean bed. To require children to lie in such a bed is to endanger their maximum development. The nongraded elementary school is being proposed as an organizational scheme for making gross differences among pupils "educationally legal" and for adapting school programs to a concept of continuous pupil progress.

Nongrading is a device for organizing the school vertically in order that curriculum and instruction may be adapted to pupil realities. It offers unique promise to countries in which education for literacy looms large as an immediate educational goal. It would appear that the excessive piling up of repeaters in the lower grades of schools in these countries might very well be prevented by removing from school expectations the need to "cover" first-grade work (whatever that might be) in the first year of school. Primary teachers would then be free to select the kindergarten-type of activities and procedures so much needed by culturally-deprived children [4].

One way, then, to unshackle teachers from the built-in pressure to cover prescribed bodies of content at pre-determined rates of speed for all pupils is to remove grade-level expectations. Much work is called for in freeing teachers from the grade-minded

approach to education in which they already have been so carefully schooled.

The Function of Elementary Education

Rapidly-changing societies run the danger of borrowing an inappropriate concept of elementary education from countries where earlier rapid change is now stabilizing. In some of these latter countries, a specifield body of knowledge and skills has come to be regarded as "an elementary education"; in fact, to be equated with education itself.

Education is not a static thing, stored away under refrigeration to be brought out according to a time schedule. It is one of the most sensitive and intimate of human processes, wherein the demands of socialization are balanced with the burgeoning needs of human personality. This process is likely to be aborted when the primary function of elementary education is viewed to be the coverage of frozen curricular goods.

I would replace the term "elementary education" with the term "childhood education". Admittedly, changing a term does not necessarily change the practices encompassed by it. But studies in linquistics reveal subtle and sometimes gross differences in human aprroaches to problems when different language is employed to describe these problems. "Elementary education", to me, suggests an arbitrarily prescribed series of content hurdles arranged in specified time units. "Childhood education", on the other hand, connotes a flexible, personalized process of educating human beings geared to the realities of individual differences.

When I cease to think of "elementary education", with all the traditions and expectations which have come to be associated with the term, I cease to ask the question, "Is this six-year-old ready for school?" When I think of childhood education, I turn the question around; it becomes, "What is this six-year-old ready for?" Time-honored rigidities in timing and pacing, curbing and inhibiting what should be an adventure in learning, are swept away.

The primary problem of educating children in rapidly changing societies is getting them into schools. But in our eagerness to increase the percentage of the childhood population enrolled

in school, let us not cripple young preople or drive them away with the educational task scarce begun. Let us not apply concepts of coverage that have lost meaning in a world of exploding knowledge and technology. Because of our schools, the world's children must develop an image of personal potential not otherwise envisioned —an image appropriate to an age of exploding human aspiration.

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[1] For more comprehensive discussion of the problems of school retention in relation to literacy, see UNESCO, *World Survey of Education-II, Primary Education*, pp. 16-18. Zurich, Switzerland: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1958.

[2] J. ROBERTO MOREIRA, "The Story of Education in Brazil", *National Elementary Principal*, 36 (Dec., 1956), 27.

[3] For a summary of research into the promotion-nonpromotion problem, see HENRY J. OTTO, "Accelerated and Retarded Progress", *Encyclopedia of Educational Research* (Third Edition, edited by Chester W. Harris), p. 8. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1960.

[4] For a detailed analysis of the rationale underlying the nongraded school, see JOHN I. GOODLAD and ROBERT H. ANDERSON, *The Nongraded Elementary School*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1959.